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The No-Conspiracy Theory

A new book on the King killing is timed just right

GERALD POSNER had been unable to generate interest at Random House in yet another book about the killing of John F. Kennedy until Oliver Stone's conspiracy-churning film "JFK" reignited popular interest in who shot the president. Published in 1993, two years after the movie came out, Posner's "Case Closed" went on to become a best-seller as it convinced numerous doubters that Lee Harvey Oswald really had acted alone, period.

For an encore, Posner started to poke around Memphis, Tenn., with an eye toward doing a book about the assassination in that city of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But despite the success of "Case Closed," and the critical acclaim for Posner's investigative skill, his publisher again showed little initial interest in his idea. Whatever mysteries surrounded King's death in 1968 were thought by Random House to intrigue readers far less than the circumstances of that fateful day in Dallas.

INK

Paul D. Colford

Instead, Posner wrote "Citizen Perot," a book about the billionaire who would be president that was published in 1996.

What then altered Random House's thinking about a King book, and got Posner a contract last spring, was the King family's outspoken belief in the innocence of James Earl Ray. First he had pleaded guilty to killing the civil-rights leader, then he recanted, claiming that a shadowy "Raoul" had ordered him to buy the murder weapon and set him up as a patsy. In a stunning encounter that took place in March, 1997, at a Nashville prison hospital, Ray proclaimed his innocence to son Dexter Scott King, who told him: "I believe you, and my family believes you."

Posner, however, does not, and the evidence he amassed now puts him at awkward odds with the much-respected King family. Posner's "Killing the Dream," published on April 4, systematically presents the case that Ray, who died last Thursday, was the shooter. In one of the many conspiracy theories that Posner throws up and knocks down, he meets the supposedly notorious "Raoul," a retired auto worker, and describes how the man could have had nothing to do with the assassination.

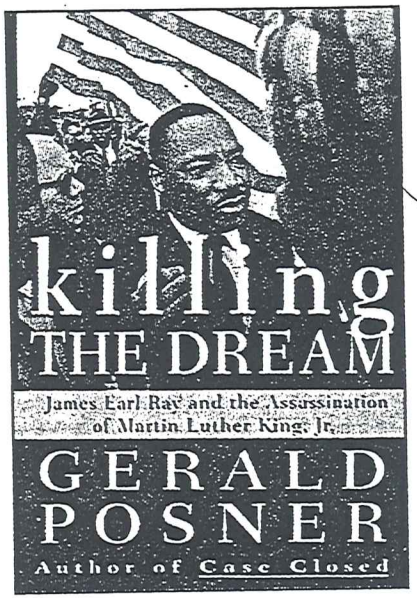
If there was a conspiracy, as the King family and others contend, Posner further reports that the scheme probably was no larger than Ray's wish to collect a $50,000 bounty that was being offered by a segregationist in St. Louis to anyone who might kill King.

"A crude family plot seems more likely than a sophisticated operation involving the Mafia or some government agency," Posner concludes in his book. He suggests that Ray may have remained silent about his own role in King's death in order to protect his relatives, "the only people he ever trusted."

Nevertheless, Coretta Scott King, King's widow, extended sympathies to Ray's family when he died from liver failure at age 70. She added: "America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establishing the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence."

Mrs. King has called on President Bill

Please see COLFORD on Page B29



A new book by Gerald Posner, below left, got new interest from Random House after Dexter Scott King, below right, told James Earl Ray, "I believe you, and my family believes you."

Christopher Bierlein Photography

The No-Conspiracy Theory Is Timed Right

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Clinton to order a new investigation into her husband's death.

"It's not a problem for me personally," Posner said of the Kings' stance. "But it's perplexing that they will not consider other evidence . . . To have them exonerate Ray seems such a perversion of justice.

"Ray had the last laugh when he died last week."

Posner, 43, added: "The Kings understood and were victims of this horrible government war — to humiliate, embarrass and discredit Martin Luther King." Indeed, in setting the scene for the shooting in Memphis, Posner notes in his book that local police officers, FBI agents and military intelligence officers were conducting surveillance of King from a fire station located a half-block from the motel where he was staying. "I condemn the FBI for conducting a war against King, but I differ with the idea that the FBI may have pulled the trigger," he said.

Members of the King family declined to be interviewed by Posner and they had not commented on his book until anchor Matt Lauer interviewed Mrs. King and Dexter King earlier this month on NBC's "Today" show.

After pointing out that Posner discredits all the conspiracy theories attached to the King slaying, Lauer asked Mrs. King for a reaction. She said that "to take an opposite side of a controversy can win recognition, as a writer . . . And, so, the evidence that we have is quite contrary to what Posner is saying."

The Kings have a new book of their own, "A Knock at Midnight" (Warner), a collection of Martin Luther King's great sermons. Edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran, it's the first volume of King's talks and writings to come from a wide-ranging contractual agreement between his family and Time Warner that was announced last year.

The Kings also have a deal with Oliver Stone for a film about the assassination — a twist that would put the director and Posner on parallel inquiries once again. Stone went public with criticism of Posner for the first time two weeks ago, contesting a favorable review of "Killing the Dream" that ran in USA Today. In a letter to the paper, Stone attacked the author for not questioning authority, for "irrational logic" and for ignoring documents in the Kennedy assassination that, the director claims, point to a conspiracy. Posner was surprised that Stone decided to lash out after all this time and added: "Of all people, it's almost asinine for Stone to accuse me of having a slippery relationship with the truth."

It's this kind of noise, coupled with news reports of the King family's doubts and obituaries of Ray, that may increase interest in "Killing the Dream." Random House reports that it has about 50,000 copies in print — a large number for a nonfiction title, but comparatively modest given Posner's reputation and the fine reviews the book has received.

It suggests, as Random House originally suspected, a more passive interest in the story among booksellers and bookbuyers.

Meanwhile, Posner has called for the release of documents on the King case that were compiled by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in the 1970s and then sealed from view. In a published essay that is among Posner's writings reprised on his Web site (http://www.posner.com), he says that this secrecy "only added to the suspicions of those who questioned whether Mr. Ray was the lone assassin."

For Posner's next book, he and his wife, Trisha, who assists on research, have turned their attention to the Motown record label, the fabled outlet for the Supremes, the Four Tops and other great R & B acts. "I see it as this great dynasty," he said.

At this early juncture, the subject of Motown may offer Posner a respite from the kind of buzz and controversy that have accompanied his books on Kennedy and King.

Then again, a lack of heat wouldn't be Posner's style.

Reviving a Dormant Novel

Richard Preston chilled readers in 1994 with "The Hot Zone," his strange-but-true account of a nasty Ebola virus that turned up five years earlier in a shipment of monkeys from the Philippines to the Washington area.

The thriller was a best-seller for Random House, spurring ambitious orders from booksellers last fall for Preston's first novel, "The Cobra Event," which concerns the tracking of a deadly virus being wielded by a terrorist.

Although the publisher printed an estimated 700,000 copies, less than a third of them sold.

However, in a rare development, there is new life for "The Cobra Event," courtesy of President Bill Clinton. A front-page story in Sunday's New York Times told of a secret exercise staged by federal officials last month to measure how the government would respond to a case of biological terrorism.

The story noted that the president's concern about germ warfare has been heightened by books. "The Cobra Event" spooked him so much that he ordered intelligence experts to assess the book's credibility.

Enter "Good Morning America," which opened its Monday broadcast with word of the government exercise and later interviewed Preston.

With all those unsold copies lying around, Random House hopes to get as much mileage out of the latest news as it can. The company is calling stores "to get the stock back out there," publicity director Tom Perry said.

Thank you, Mr. President. ■

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Neeson's Wilde

man, was a great beauty, the love of the Irish playwright's life. By making him such an unredeemable

This Love Story's for the Birds

BIRDS from Page B2

Park. It will delight nature-lovers and, as a slice of quirky city life, amuse those with a fondness for stories involving